

VZCZCXR07145
RR RUEHNEH
DE RUEHKA #0443/01 1241001
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 041001Z MAY 09ZDF
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8752
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2075
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 2837
RHHMUNS/COMSOCOPAC HONOLULU HI
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHHJJPI/PACOM IDHS HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000443

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/INSB, S/CT, INR, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/31/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR PTER KDEM KISL SOCI BG

SUBJECT: ISLAMIC PARTIES AND THE QAWMI MADRASA COMMUNITY (3 OF 3)

REF: A. DHAKA 239 AND PREVIOUS

1B. DHAKA 419

1C. DHAKA 431

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Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Addressing problems related to the country's privately-funded unregulated Islamic education system (qawmi madrasas - QMs) has emerged as one of the Awami League government's top priorities. A proportion of Bangladesh's Deobandi qawmi madrasa (DQM) community has strong ties to small Islamic political parties which are willing to resort to "street politics" to defend their interests.

Statistically, the electoral influence of the smaller Islamic parties and their related QM population is tiny. However, their overall influence is to some degree greater than election results suggest. This reflects the DQM's ability to "take to the streets" in support of the DQM agenda, and Government of Bangladesh (GOB) fears that such activity may provide cover for "other elements" with a separate, anti-government agenda. End summary.

12. (SBU) This is Part 3 of a 3-part series of cables on Bangladesh's Deobandi qawmi madrasa system. Part 1 (ref B) provides background on the DQMs' origin and curriculum, organizational structure in Bangladesh, their own perception of their social role and their demands of the GOB. Part 2 (ref C) describes the GOB position on QM reform and interaction between the GOB and the DQM community. This cable describes the nexus between Bangladesh's smaller Islamic political parties and the DQM community.

BANGLADESH'S ISLAMIC PARTIES) MORE THAN JUST JAMAAT

13. (U) Bangladesh's Islamic parties collectively garnered approximately 4.1 million votes in the December parliamentary election (about 70 million total votes were cast). The vast majority - 3.1 million - of those Islamic party votes went to Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), the country's largest Islamic political party. The remaining 1.1 million votes were divided among the nine other Islamic parties which contested the election.

14. (SBU) 735,000 votes went to Islami Andolon, a party led by a prominent Bangladeshi "holy man" known as the Pir of Charmonai, while 135,400 went to the Zaker party, led by a

rival pir known as Atroshi. Successively smaller numbers of votes went to the remaining Islamic parties. (Note: JI won two parliamentary seats; no other Islamic party won a seat. There are also dozens of other small parties in Bangladesh which did not run in the December election. These parties) both Islamic and secular - are known as "letterhead" parties and are often formed by one individual with a handful of supporters and no serious political prospects. End note.)

THE DQM SYSTEM AND POLITICS) SOME DO POLITICS, SOME DON'T

15. (SBU) As reported ref B, Mufti Abdur Rahman, the founder and chairman of the influential Federation of Qawmi Madrasa Boards (FQMB) and senior opinion-leader in the DQM community, criticizes political involvement by DQM representatives and reportedly believes the DQM system should remain apolitical, in large part to avoid becoming politicized itself. Broadly) although there seem to be exceptions) those in the FQMB camp appear to be less politically active than those in the camp of the rival DQM board conglomerate, Befaqul Madaris Al Arabia (BMA). (See Ref B for background on both and on the split between them.)

16. (SBU) Pro-BMA parties such as Islami Andolon, the Zaker Party, Khelafat Majlish, Khelaft Andolon, Jomiate Ulamae Islami, and Islami Oikya Jote have strong connections to the DQM system. These small parties (apart from Islami Andolon and the Zaker Party, none garnered more than 30,000 votes in the 2008 election) usually have leaders who are graduates of the QM system, and in many cases, are active founders or principals of QM schools. For example, the three MPs in the previous BNP government who spearheaded a high-profile BMA push for government recognition of the highest QM education

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certificate (ref B) were Mufti Fadlul Haque Amini, head of the IOJ party, principal of a qawmi madrasa in Dhaka and loud public voice of the BMA; Mufti Shahidul Islam, now a senior leader of the Khelafat Majlish party and a BMA board member; and Mufti Mohammed Wakkas, now the Secretary General of Jamiate Ulame Islam and a QM graduate himself. Khelafat Majlish chief Habibur Rahman, also a QM graduate, is principal of the Jamea Madania Islamia madrasa in Sylhet and a BMA board member.

ISLAMIC PARTIES AND THE DQM COMMUNITY

17. (SBU) Bangladesh's plethora of Islamic political parties can broadly be divided into two groups) those which do not have close ties to the DQM system, and those which do. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) - the country's biggest political party - and a few other very small parties do not have close ties with the DQM system, while six of the nine other parties which contested the 2008 election do.

JI: OFFICIALLY TOLERANT, PRIVATELY CRITICAL OF QM SYSTEM

18. (C) JI's broadly mainstream conservative "global" Sunni Islam is officially tolerant of Bangladesh's culturally more colorful syncretic Islam, with its emphasis on the Sufi-centered "pir" (holy man) culture. However, individual JI representatives often speak critically of this culture) particularly its "saint and shrine culture" where believers make pilgrimages to the burial places of deceased pirs whom they venerate as saints - as "contrary" to Islam. Further, given JI's great institutional emphasis on the value of a modern education, JI representatives also in private strongly criticize the QM system, with its overriding focus on religious education to the exclusion of other aspects of education.

19. (C) To date, JI has been publicly silent on state attempts to regulate the QM system described in Refs B and C,

apparently feeling they have no dog in this fight as yet. This could change if the issue is later convincingly framed as a more general struggle between Islamic interests vs secular interests in Bangladesh.

JAMAAT: THE 800-POUND GORILLA IN ISLAMIC POLITICS

¶10. (C) In their turn, the smaller Islamic parties tend to have a negative perception of JI. Some) such as Tarikat Foundation, Islami Andolon and Zaker - are openly pir-based, with varying degrees of tolerance towards the excesses of the "saint and shrine culture." Others, such as Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), accept some pirs as "sahih" ("correct" in Arabic) and reject others as "batil" ("broken" or "skewed" in Arabic), but strongly denounce saint-worshipping and shrine-pilgrimages as "un-Islamic." Such parties chafe at JI as the 800-pound gorilla in the Islamic community and not necessarily as "Bangladeshi" in outlook as it might be. Some occasionally publicly criticize JI) for example, the Zaker Party chief has gone on record accusing JI of "distorting Islam." In a high-profile April 18 meeting between the Prime Minister and 82 senior representatives of the DQM community, Misbahur Rahman Chowdhury, leader of an IOJ faction, publicly accused JI of encouraging militancy in Bangladesh. Similarly, in an April 22 meeting with Poloff, Habibur Rahman and Shahidul Islam - the leader and deputy leader of Khalafat Majlish - energetically accused JI of supporting and condoning violent extremist activity in Bangladesh.

¶11. (SBU) On the other hand, another faction of IOJ (itself an alliance of several tiny Islamic parties) is a member of the BNP 4 Party Alliance, which includes JI. Its spokesperson, BMA's Fadlul Haque Amini, spoke out in support of JI in a recent controversy over war crimes allegedly committed during Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Although statistically the political influence of the smaller Islamic parties and their related DQM population is very small, their overall influence is probably some degrees

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greater than voting results suggest, for several reasons. One is that most December 2008 votes from the country's conservative Islamic community likely went to candidates from parties within the BNP-led Four Party Alliance (which includes JI), so those "Islamic" votes are not necessarily separately identifiable as such. JI and IOJ candidates received the Four Party Alliance ticket in 35 out of 300 constituencies and in most of the rest threw their support behind the Four Party Alliance candidate from the BNP.

¶13. (C) Secondly, the qawmi madrasa student population represents a formidably dedicated and organized cadre of campaign workers that effectively boost the chances of those for whom they campaign. A former BNP Education Minister told Poloff that DQM students were "the best" campaign workers) working hard and diligently to reach all voters and deliver campaign leaflets while dealing honestly and effectively with monetary and other campaign resources allocated to them.

¶14. (C) Thirdly, the qawmi madrasa population also represents an unquestioningly obedient "street power" force that can be called upon by DQM leaders at will. As reported Ref C, the PM's Religious Affairs Secretary told Poloff April 21 the GOB was concerned not so much about public rallies by the legitimate QM community, as about the possibility that such demonstrations could be used as cover by "other elements" with nefarious intent to cause chaos and "make the government look bad." The government's swift response to the DQM community's threatened April 20 large-scale demonstration (Ref C) shows both sides are keenly aware of the potential for instability lying within this capability.

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